

NBC SUNRISE/TODAY SHOW

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KOREAN AIRLINE  
INCIDENT

GUMBEL: It's been nearly a year since a Soviet missile destroyed Korean Airlines flight 007, killing all 269 people on board. Well, now an article in The Nation magazine raises some serious questions about the U.S. role in that tragedy. The article contends that at the very least, the U.S. intelligence community suffered an unprecedented breakdown that night for failing to warn the KAL pilot on both his errors in navigation and the threat posed by the Soviet jets. Sen. Patrick Leahy is a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and he joins us this morning from our studios in Washington. Good morning, Senator. SEN. PATRICK LEAHY (D-Ver., member of Senate Select Committee): Good morning, Bryant.

GUMBEL: You've had a chance, I'm sure, to read the David Pearson article in The Nation, contending the U.S. officials knew the plane was off course, yet did nothing about it. Your reaction. LEAHY: Well, I've read the article and I've gone back and reviewed all the evidence that we had available to us in the intelligence committee and, in fact did it again over this past weekend. The article is a fascinating compendium of coincidences and hypothesis, but it comes out false in the end. It really makes no sense at all. It suggests, or actually, pretty much states that we sent the Korean Airline plane over there on a spy mission. What it never faces up to is that there is nothing at all that the Korean airline could have done on a spy mission, assuming that that's what was gonna be done, assuming that we outfitted it with all kinds of cameras and electronic equipment and everything else, it still would have got nothing that we already had.

GUMBEL: I don't think he was suggesting necessarily that it was on a spy mission so much as he was suggesting, well let me show you something from the interview, so much as he was suggesting that as the plane was lost, and the Soviets scrambled after it, the U.S. might reap some kind of intelligence bonanza. Let me show you this bit of tape from the interview we did with David Pearson last Thursday. PEARSON: The best response to that is precisely what occurred, one of the largest intelligence coups in history occurred that night.

GUMBEL: What kind of an intelligence coup? PEARSON: By that I mean U.S. signals intelligence and radar equipment monitored, monitored the Soviets turning on virtually

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every piece of electronic equipment in the Far East. They monitored communications patterns over the Kamchatka Peninsula, over Sakhalin Island, between those two locations and between those locations and regional command centers and between those locations and Moscow.

GUMBLE: Is he off base, Senator? LEAHY: Ya know, that sounds great, to say the greatest intelligence bonanza in history, except it's just not so. The Soviets did nothing that they haven't done before during that. It is in a case where you send a plane in or could send a plane and all of a sudden we see this great panoply of electronic emissions and suddenly discover the secret access to the Soviets. That's not the case. That just did not happen. It makes a great story, but that's not what happened. In fact, if these things that test the Soviet radar, and we do this all the time, we have other methods that we can use, that do not put us, or anybody else, in any kind of danger. The United States would not send, would not allow and would not use civilian aircraft in this way because of precisely what happened. We know that this is a thing the Soviets would do, the plane straight across like that, they would shoot it down. It was a cold-blooded act of murder, barbarous act of murder on the part of the Soviet Union. They would commit that same act of murder if it was done tomorrow and the United States just would not allow a plane to do that.

GUMBLE: Senator, former CIA Director Stansfield Turner says the United States could release more information relating to the incident without compromising national security. Do you agree? LEAHY: I've seen in the material, both what's been released and what hasn't. In this case, an extraordinary amount of material was released. I think a lot of us wish that there had not been as much because it shows what our capabilities are. I don't know of anything further that could be released that adds to it. The problem that we have here, and I'm as skeptical of the activities of our intelligence agencies as anybody else. I am, after all, the one who went in, delved into the Nicaraguan mining, have been the biggest critic of the covert action Nicaragua, but we've got to accept the fact that in many, many times our intelligence agencies act very proper, follow the law, do what they're suppose to and that there isn't anything here to hide and there's gonna be a lot of stories, they make great reading, they'll sell magazines, they'll sell books, but they're just not accurate.

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GUMBLE: So you called it, shortly after the incident, a cold, calculating act of murder. You've seen nothing to change your opinion? LEAHY: I've seen nothing to change it nor have I seen anything at all which indicates to me that our intelligence agencies acted improperly or in any in the way that it's suggested by this article.

GUMBLE: Sen. Patrick Leahy, thank you for joining us this morning.